

Tallest tower poised to give City's skyline a lift

REVIEW

Edwin
Heathcote



It would be the tallest building in the City of London and complete the array of towers that began with the Gherkin and rose up to the Cheesegrater. At 309.6m, 1 Undershaft would be more than 80m taller than its neighbour, 122 Leadenhall (the Cheesegrater), contain more than 90,000 sq m of commercial space and be, according to architect Eric Parry, "the final piece of the jigsaw" of the City cluster skyline.

But unlike its neighbours, Mr Parry's skyscraper might be less easily reduced to a cutesy nickname. There is no attempt at branding through form here, just an austere, functional and slender structure.

The tower, developed by Singaporean Aroland Holdings, would replace a 28-storey structure completed in 1969. Heavily influenced by Chicago's postwar commercial architecture, it was badly damaged by an IRA bomb that exploded in Bishopsgate in 1993.

Its replacement also has a hint of the Windy City in its stripped-down minimalism and distinctive X-bracing.

The bracing is necessary because of the architect's wish to create a visual and physical connection between two of the City of London's oldest places of worship, St Helen's Bishopsgate and St Andrew Undershaft — both founded in the 12th century.

To do this, the tower has been raised above the ground, leaving a 10.5m public space beneath it. In the process, the building's core has had to be pushed to one side, which necessitates the bracing on its external walls.

Mr Parry's plans would also create a large public square in front of the tower with a sunken area of shops and restaurants in the form of a recessed ellipse.

The architect refers to New York's Rockefeller Center, which features a similarly sunken piazza, where commercial architecture is animated by

becoming part of city life at weekends, in the evenings, and in the working day.

Although the tower appears to be a simple extruded block, its design in fact employs a subtle *entasis* — a trick the Greeks used on their columns.

The tower tapers almost imperceptibly as it rises. The bracing also slims down to reflect the decreasing need for reinforcement on the higher storeys.

The bracing itself, crosses of a slightly folded section of weathered steel, gives the tower its architectural expression — echoing the structure of both the neighbouring Gherkin and Cheesegrater.

"I think it stands out," Mr Parry told the FT, "through its proportions, the expression of its structure and its materiality, which it wears on its skin."

The top of the tower would have the City's highest viewing platform, which would be free to the public, and an education floor for schoolchildren. Beneath these would be a restaurant.

'It stands out, through its proportions, the expression of its structure and its materiality'

Mr Parry has arguably developed the most sophisticated approach to the City of London of any of the architects working in the capital today.

His buildings, including 60 Threadneedle Street, 5 Aldermanbury Square, and new projects in Gresham Street, Fenchurch Street and the Worshipful Company of Leathersellers, show an understanding of the grain and texture of the City streets.

So much so that when asked whether it feels good to be designing the City's tallest building he looks almost nonplussed. "The height was always predetermined," Mr Parry said. "What seems more significant to me is the way in which the building can contribute to the urban context."

He added: "There is the world of the everyday and the sacred domain of churches below and, at the top, the idea of education and understanding that takes the height beyond the realm of the corporate."



The proposed 1 Undershaft tower, foreground, would dwarf its City of London neighbour, the Cheesegrater